

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Feedlot placements change timing of fed cattle

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Stronger than expected fed cattle prices so far this year have encouraged feedlots to market cattle aggressively and to place more cattle on feed. In the most recent USDA Cattle on Feed report February placements were up 15 percent from last year's low February placement total. This placement total was up one percent from the previous five year average February placements. Feedlots have placed more cattle four of the past five months, resulting in nearly 600,000 more head of cattle placed compared to the same period one year ago. Relatively large placements in January and February have pushed the March 1 feedlot inventory to an unusual March seasonal peak. The normal March increase in feedlot marketings and likely smaller year over year March placements are almost sure to result in a lower April 1 feedlot inventory. In 14 of the last 17 years, the seasonal peak in feedlot inventories has occurred in December, once in January and twice in February but never in the history of the current cattle on feed data has the seasonal peak occurred in March.

This late peak in feedlot inventories could suggest either a late peak in marketings or some bunching of cattle into the seasonal peak of marketings and slaughter. It depends on the placement weight distribution along with weather and market factors that may change the timing. In the past, peak marketings have occurred in June nine of the past 18 years; four times in May and five times in July. Based on the placement weights, it does not appear that the late March peak in feedlot inventories will result in a late peak in marketings. In fact, my current projections suggest that May marketings will be seasonally strong and may be as large or larger than June marketings. It should be noted over half of the large increase in February placements were cattle under 700 pounds that will not be marketed until late summer.

The bigger question may be how the fed market will transition from the current tight supplies and high prices to a slightly bigger than expected seasonal peak in supplies in the May/June period. Year to date slaughter decreases combined with steer and heifer carcass weights at or below year ago levels is keeping beef supplies tight. The incentive to pull feedlot cattle forward

will likely continue into April and may extend far enough to pull some May cattle into April. Cold and variable weather in March continues to negatively impact animal performance and the impacts may stretch into April. All in all, the recent increase in placements suggests only a modest increase in seasonal marketings into May and June. This may add some seasonal price pressure to fed markets going into summer. However, from the current \$150/cwt. spring top, such pressure would not likely push summer fed cattle prices below the mid \$130s/cwt.

Energy intake is important in post-calving cows

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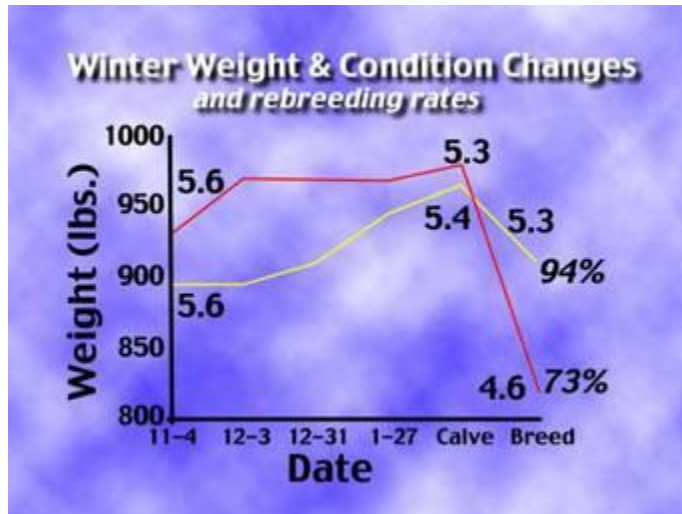
The winter of 2013-2014 has brought challenges in the form of very high feed prices, cold weather, and in some instances, short hay supplies. Cows in many Midwestern herds are calving in marginal body condition. Unfortunately, this is a season where maintaining or gaining body condition on spring calving cows is really quite difficult. Warm season grasses have not yet begun to grow. Dormant grass (what little is left) is a low quality feed. Cows cannot, or will not, consume a large amount of standing dormant grass at this time year. If the only supplement being fed is a self-fed, self-limited protein source, the cows may become very deficient in energy. Remember, the instructions that accompany these self-fed supplements. They are to be fed along with free choice access to adequate quantity and quality forages.

There is another factor that compounds the problem. A small amount of winter annual grasses may begin to grow in native pastures. These are the first tastes of green grass many cows have seen since last summer. The cows may try to forage these high moisture, low energy density grasses, in lieu of more energy dense hays or cubes. **The sad result is the loss of body condition in early lactation beef cows just before the breeding season is about to begin.**

Body condition at the time of calving is the most important factor affecting rebreeding performance of normally managed beef cows. Nonetheless, condition changes after calving will have more subtle effects on rebreeding especially in cows that are in marginal body condition. Body condition changes from the time the cow calves until she begins the breeding season can play a significant role in the rebreeding success story. This appears to be most important to those cows that calve in the marginal body condition score range of "4" or "5". An Oklahoma trial illustrates the vulnerability of cows that calve in the body condition score of 5. Two groups of cows began the winter feeding period in similar body condition and calved in very similar body condition. However, after calving and before the breeding season began, one group was allowed to lose almost one condition score. The other group of cows was fed adequately to maintain the body condition that they had prior to calving. The difference in rebreeding rate was dramatic (73% vs 94%). Again this illustrates that cows that calve in the body condition score of 5 are very vulnerable to weather and suckling intensity stresses and ranchers must use good nutritional strategies after calving to avoid disastrous rebreeding performance.

Figure 1. Change in body condition after calving influences rebreeding rates. Cows that maintain body condition (yellow line) had a rebreeding rate of 94%. Cows that lost body

condition after calving (red line) had a rebreeding rate of 73% (Wettemann, et al., 1987 Journ. Animal Sci., Suppl. 1:63).



Hereford and Angus cows in the 1980's were much smaller than most cows today but the body condition score is still the same. Cows should calve in moderate to good condition (scores of 5 or 6) to ensure good rebreeding efficiency. Ideally, cows should be maintaining condition during mid to late pregnancy and gaining during breeding. The goal of the management program should be to achieve these body conditions by making maximum use of the available forage resource.

Continue feeding a source of energy, such as moderate to good quality grass hay free choice and high energy supplements until the warm season grasses grow enough to provide both the energy and protein that the lactating cows need. Yes, the feed is high-priced. But the cost of losing 21% of next year's calf crop is even greater!

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